

is deeply enthusiastic about other-sex is probably not much larger than those exclusively devoted to same-sex—something like 10 percent in either case. The remaining 80 percent does this, does that, does nothing; settles into an acceptable if dull social role where the husband dreams of Barbara Bush while pounding the old wife, who lies there, eyes shut, dreaming of Barbara too. Yes, the whole thing is a perfect mess, but my conscience is clear. I have just done something more rare than people suspect—stated the obvious. □

## ■ END OF STORY

# The Dark World of Danny Casolaro

DAVID CORN

**D**anny Casolaro lived and died in a bizarre world of conspiracy. On August 10, the 44-year-old writer's body was discovered naked in a bathtub in Room 517 of the Sheraton hotel in Martinsburg, West Virginia, sixty miles from Washington. His wrists had been slashed ten to twelve times. The local police, who found no signs of struggle or forced entry, at first thought they had just another suicide on their hands.

Casolaro's friends and family are not so sure. For more than a year, Casolaro had been pursuing some favorite stories of investigative journalists: the October Surprise allegations that the Reagan-Bush campaign cut a deal in 1980 with Iranians to delay the release of hostages; the Bank of Credit and Commerce International (B.C.C.I.) scandal; and the Inslaw case, in which a small computer software firm has claimed—and some courts have confirmed—that the Justice Department swiped a valuable software program it developed. Casolaro, who had little experience as an investigative reporter, hoped to unearth links between these and other scandals, such as the Iran/*contra* affair. He was chasing a grand unified conspiracy he dubbed the Octopus, run by about eight men and dating back to the 1950s. His goal, he wrote in a proposal for a book to be called *Behold, A Pale Horse*, was to expose an international cabal made up of "thugs and thieves who roam the earth with their weapons and their murders, trading dope and dirty money for the secrets of the temple." His death came during a trip to see a person whom he described to others as a new, significant source. But Casolaro seems not to have told anyone who that source was or what breakthrough he believed he was nearing.

Given the nature of his endeavors, his family and associates found his death particularly suspicious. Casolaro had even said to his brother Tony, a medical doctor, that if anything happened to him that looked like an accident, not to believe it. He told friends he had received threatening phone calls, and his housekeeper confirmed this. In the weeks before his death, Casolaro, an irrepressible fellow who had written a novel and published newsletters on computers, appeared upbeat. He informed friends that he was close to obtaining

a book contract. He was excited about this new source of his. He had several trips planned for the coming months. One law enforcement official who spoke with him a few days before his death says that Casolaro appeared "too anxious, too eager, to do himself in."

To family and friends, convinced that suicide was not in his nature, there were more troubling concrete aspects of the death itself. Tony Casolaro points out that no papers were found in the hotel room or in Casolaro's car (apparently he always carted files around with him); an autopsy discovered an antidepressant in his blood and urine (his brother the doctor says no such drug was prescribed for Casolaro); an X-Acto blade found in the bathtub is not sold locally (which could mean that unless Casolaro came to Martinsburg to kill himself, someone else did); and a briefcase of Casolaro's may be missing. There are, Casolaro says, some hard-to-explain phone calls. The day after Casolaro's body was found, *Village Voice* editor Dan Bischoff received an anonymous call; the voice on the other end reported that a journalist named Casolaro was found dead in West Virginia, that he had been working on the October Surprise story and that this should be scrutinized. Since Casolaro's death did not become widely known until the next day, when the Martinsburg police finally notified his family, the source of the caller's knowledge is a mystery. Tony Casolaro says an F.B.I. agent informed him that a similar call was received by a bureau office in New York.

These anomalies do not add up to a conclusive case for murder. Perhaps Casolaro was disappointed. He reportedly did meet with someone at his hotel. Did his big source turn out to be a bust? Did he throw out his own papers in disgust? Were they stolen for some other reason? He told people a book deal was pending, but a review of his papers, notes and drafts of his book proposal indicates that he did not yet have a coherent story or the proof that most publishers would demand. No publisher has come forward to say that it was about to sign him up. He had money problems—but then so do most freelance writers. A *Washington Post* article about his final days focused on his prodigious consumption of alcohol. The autopsy showed he had developed multiple sclerosis; he might have known about it. The Martinsburg police are still investigating.

**W**hat had Casolaro found, if anything? That's the essential question. For if he was murdered, presumably it was because he had discovered some dangerous information. There are few obvious clues in the papers he left behind—old clippings, some documents, hard-to-decipher handwritten notes full of names of former C.I.A. officers, arms dealers and others who have surfaced in various intelligence-related scandals. There are plenty of telephone numbers; his bills show that he spent hours on the phone. But there are hardly any notes from his interviews.

The impression all this leaves is of someone who was in over his head but who was tenacious. Those who worked with Casolaro described him as a bit of a noodle, an enthusiast utterly dedicated to his project. His papers—including some draft narratives written in overly dramatic, purplish prose—indicate that he approached his subject matter more as a novelist than a reporter. For someone who devoted a year to his

investigation, he had not uncovered a lot of new material.

Casolaro had, though, developed ties with some strange, and perhaps dangerous, characters. His entry point was the Inslaw case, and through it he met Michael Riconosciuto, a shadowy 44-year-old mad-scientist sort who since March has been in jail in Washington State on drug charges. Since 1983 Inslaw has been battling the Justice Department in the courts, charging that the department stole from it \$6 million worth of software used to help prosecutors track cases. In 1988 a federal bankruptcy judge ruled that Edwin Meese's Justice Department filched the software "by trickery, fraud and deceit." That decision was affirmed by a federal district court in 1989 but was reversed by an appeals court a few months ago. Meanwhile, the House Judiciary Committee has been examining the matter.

But there's more to the Inslaw story than merely an alleged swindle. Inslaw's owners have suggested that the Justice Department officials appropriated their product for a number of unusual reasons: to give it to Earl Brian, a businessman and Meese crony who served in Governor Ronald Reagan's Cabinet in California, as a reward for Brian's supposed help in the October Surprise; to raise off-the-books money for covert actions; or to turn it over to the National Security Agency for marketing to foreign intelligence services.

What prompted William and Nancy Hamilton, Inslaw's co-owners, to connect their personal nightmare with the October Surprise was a phone call from Riconosciuto on May 18, 1990. Riconosciuto asserted that he and Brian had traveled to Iran in 1980 and paid \$40 million to Iranian officials to persuade them not to let the hostages go before the presidential election. For two and a half hours, he went on telling similar tales. He claimed to have been involved with weapons development and that in the early 1980s he engaged in C.I.A.-

financed work as part of a joint weapons-manufacturing venture between the Wackenhut Corporation, a security company partially run by former intelligence and military officials, and the Cabazon Indian Reservation in the Southern California desert. He maintained that he was now being hounded by the federal government and that he possessed a secretly recorded tape of a meeting he attended with then-Director of Central Intelligence William Casey in 1983.

Hamilton began to check on Riconosciuto. To others Riconosciuto had revealed that he had equipped Awacs aircraft destined for Saudi Arabia with sophisticated radar technology proscribed by Congress. Riconosciuto does have a high-tech background. When he was in high school he was something of a scientific prodigy and even worked for a while in the Stanford University laboratory of Arthur Schawlow, who would win a Nobel Prize in 1981 for work on laser technology. Hamilton learned that in the 1980s Riconosciuto had been trying to develop a type of bomb that could generate the force of an atomic blast with conventional explosives, and that, as president of a small R&D company, he reportedly had invented a new miniaturized power-supply technology. Hamilton discovered that Wackenhut had indeed entered into the venture with the Cabazons to produce arms and equipment on their remote and sovereign territory for U.S. agencies and that Riconosciuto was somehow part of the project. (In a not-too-strange twist of fate, Casey was outside counsel to Wackenhut before he became Director of Central Intelligence.) Hamilton also found that Riconosciuto, the high-tech genius, had been arrested years earlier for illegal drug manufacturing.

On March 21 Riconosciuto submitted an affidavit in the Inslaw case claiming that when he worked on the Wackenhut-Cabazon project, he was given a copy of the Inslaw software by Earl Brian for modification. He also swore that Peter Videnieks, a Justice Department official associated with the Inslaw contract, had visited the Wackenhut-Cabazon project with Brian and that Videnieks had called Riconosciuto in February and said that if Riconosciuto cooperated with a Congressional inquiry into the Inslaw controversy, he could expect legal trouble. Lawyers for Brian and Videnieks denied the allegations contained in the affidavit, as well as similar charges contained in affidavits submitted by two other men, who claimed to be former spooks with inside dope on the Inslaw case. Eight days after signing his affidavit, Riconosciuto was again arrested, this time for allegedly distributing methamphetamine.

Casolaro's investigation of the Inslaw case brought him to Riconosciuto's doorstep. He visited the boy genius/drug dealer/weapons expert in jail. Riconosciuto told him he had a tape recording of Videnieks's purported threat. But he never gave it to Casolaro. Still, the two talked often. Riconosciuto is a good and fast talker, seemingly intelligent and quite crafty. In rapid-fire delivery he shoots out information—some of it incredible. There does not seem to be a national security scandal of which he does not possess firsthand knowledge. He says he was involved in wire transfers of the shady Nugan Hand bank, which was set up in Australia in the 1970s by people with connections to the C.I.A. He maintains he has inside information about Gerald Bull, the arms dealer who traded with



South Africa, designed a supergun (a kind of gigantic cannon) and was killed, execution style, last year in Brussels. Casolaro intended to include Riconosciuto in his book under the melodramatic sobriquet "Danger Man."

Riconosciuto's allegations are hard to swallow. He generally does not produce the evidence he says he has that would confirm the more outlandish portions of his story. In an interview, he suggested that Casolaro's death was connected to the writer's inquiry into Riconosciuto's allegations. He also said that Anson Ng, a journalist recently killed in Guatemala, had been investigating an episode involving Riconosciuto and the Cabazon reservation. Riconosciuto said he had letters to that effect, but he didn't provide the letters. Ng's family believes that Anson was working on the B.C.C.I. scandal.

As Riconosciuto tells it, all scandals overlap, and he is in the midst of most of them. (He is receiving assistance from Ted Gunderson, a former F.B.I. agent who is convinced that satanic cults are rampant and part of a complicated network that includes drug traffickers, kiddie-porn rings and paramilitary and intelligence-related operatives.) It's difficult to figure out whether Riconosciuto is on the side of the Octopus or struggling against it. It's equally tough to distinguish his facts from fiction. He is a familiar type to journalists who cover national security scandals: the spook defector, someone who has worked in the field of intelligence or weapons dealing and then leaves. He arrives with the details of his own story, but often they are intricately intertwined with second-hand or thirdhand material he has collected from other spooks or even from journalists or, perhaps, made up. Casolaro, according to his own papers, did not accept all that Riconosciuto spewed. But he was drawn to the conspiracies Riconosciuto spun and possibly was seduced a little too much by his yarns. "I was giving him a road map," Riconosciuto declares. If so, that would make for a tortuous trip.

One stop on that road map was Robert Nichols. People who have met Nichols describe him as a James Bond type: Clark Gable handsome, mysterious, proficient with guns and a constant traveler who jets all over the world trading arms and other products. According to legal records, Nichols runs Meridian International Logistics, a California-based company that does extensive business overseas, especially in Australia and Japan; engages in innovative medical research; markets low-cost earth removal systems; and owns 100 percent of Meridian Arms Corporation. Out of the Wackenhut-Cabazon endeavor grew a business partnership between Nichols and Riconosciuto. The two, according to documents and correspondence of a business associate, expected to develop technologies useful for pesticides, fertilizer and some very dangerous weapons. Nichols's company, according to this correspondence, was formed in the 1970s to develop a sub-machine gun that could be produced at a unit cost of \$50 or less in the Philippines, Korea, Taiwan and other developing nations. But the company apparently ran into difficulties when the State Department decided it was not such a good idea to export this technology. The Nichols-Riconosciuto venture had hoped to start production of this weapon in Australia in 1983. In 1984, Nichols noted in a letter that they were also

trying to create "enhanced gaseous fuel devices"—tremendously powerful explosives that, like a nuclear blast, would produce an electromagnetic pulse that could wipe out an enemy's communications and electronics.

Nichols and Riconosciuto had a falling-out in 1984, Riconosciuto asserts, and have not spoken since. But the secretive Nichols chatted with Casolaro frequently. Casolaro's July phone bill shows that he called Nichols fifteen times, often in the wee hours of the morning. Several of those conversations lasted for more than two hours. The two spent time together in the Washington, D.C., area. Casolaro's papers do not contain any notes indicating what they discussed. His brother Tony says that, according to Casolaro, Nichols would never disclose the specifics of his current business deals. According to one person who regularly spoke with Casolaro, Casolaro said that Nichols had told him about a building in Georgetown where unusual activities were occurring and that he (Casolaro) was eager to stake it out. Casolaro mentioned the building to his brother but never said what he expected to find there, nor did he ever tell his brother whether he visited it.

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### *Casolaro met with queer coincidences that would feed anyone's paranoia.*

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Danny Casolaro told both his brother and Bill Hamilton that Nichols had warned him that his investigations were risky. Casolaro, who described Nichols as a thug who acted like a gentleman, was puzzled by Nichols's admonition, his brother recalls; he could not determine whether Nichols was sincerely cautioning him or subtly dispensing a threat. Nichols, after Casolaro's death, called Tony, expressed his condolences and observed that Casolaro had truly taken a liking to him.

There is no evidence that Casolaro's curious relationship with Nichols in and of itself imperiled the writer, but if the F.B.I. is right, Nichols is not a man whose warnings should be taken lightly. He is currently suing Thomas Gates, an F.B.I. agent who accused him of being involved in a \$500 million fraud and of maintaining ties to the Gambino crime family and organized crime in Japan. According to a deposition filed by Gates, the bureau suspected Nichols of conspiring with known organized-crime figures to commit stock fraud. Gates's deposition was part of a 1987 request to place a wiretap on the phone of Eugene Giaquinto, an official of the M.C.A. entertainment corporation with reputed mob links. Nichols was one of the people whose calls the bureau expected to intercept. According to the wiretap application, F.B.I. investigative files indicated that in 1978 Nichols was "allegedly an international money launderer for money generated through narcotics trafficking and organized crime activities." The wiretap request—a copy of which was part of Casolaro's papers—suggested that Nichols was plotting with Giaquinto and may have been involved in "some type of covert activity." Nichols did not respond to several messages requesting an interview

for this article. Riconosciuto claims that Nichols was using Casolaro to keep track of him—Riconosciuto. But anything Riconosciuto says must be taken with a salt mine.

While conducting his researches, Casolaro met with queer coincidences that would feed anyone's paranoia. At a restaurant he ran into a former Special Forces operative who had worked for a company involved in the Inslaw case; he was also a good friend of Peter Videnieks (a prime target of Casolaro's investigation) and graciously offered to try to set up a rendezvous between Casolaro and Videnieks shortly before Casolaro died. That Casolaro should just happen to bump into someone like that—someone who offered to be so helpful—spooked his brother and friends. On another occasion, a woman at a party befriended Casolaro and a pal, insisted that she leave with them and accompanied them back to Casolaro's house, where she talked knowingly about some aspects of Casolaro's investigation. She also revealed that she was close to a former C.I.A. official whom Casolaro believed was connected to his mythical Octopus. Casolaro and his friend were both unnerved by this supposedly chance meeting.

Like any good investigative reporter, Casolaro sucked up information from everywhere—and with it a lot of garbage. His notes show that he was influenced by the silly "secret team" theory of the Christic Institute. He also chased down material fed to him by a reporter who works for Lyndon LaRouche, the grandmaster of conspiracy theories. He regularly called a computer junk dealer in Kentucky who slyly hints that he is well wired in intelligence circles. Casolaro's papers contain plenty of material from Richard Brenneke, a discredited arms dealer who claimed to have participated in the supposed October Surprise scheme. One of the last persons to see Casolaro alive in Martinsburg—a whistleblower who had worked for a military contractor—was recently arrested for robbing a bank in Virginia.

The story of Danny Casolaro is, at this point, a frustrating one. The suicide explanation is unsatisfying but not wholly implausible; the possibility of murder is intriguing but the evidence to date is not overwhelming. If anyone did eliminate him, it probably was not because Casolaro was about to confirm the ultimate conspiracy or even had achieved a major find in the areas in which he was digging. It may be that as he stumbled along the pathway of conspiracy he overturned one stone that threatened somebody in a very particular way. So far, several journalists who have tried to trace Casolaro's steps have not come up with any information that strongly supports or disproves the murder theory. (Two news organizations are now going through his phone records and supposedly calling everyone whom Casolaro phoned in the last year of his life.) Elliot Richardson, the eminently respectable former Attorney General, who represents Inslaw, has called for the appointment of a special counsel to look into Casolaro's death. A thorough investigation is warranted, but that job might be too big for the Martinsburg police. Although some F.B.I. agents have expressed an interest in the death, currently there is no official bureau probe.

"It is a pale moon that illuminates the characters in this story," Casolaro wrote. "With chords of fear and longing, it



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## LARRY GROW

*A gallant  
man of letters*

**1939-1991**

is a dark world that everyone thinks they know but few have seen." The cosmos of Riconosciuto, Wackenhut, the Cabazon reservation, Nichols and so on is a Twin Peaks universe. The schemes are wild, the inhabitants odd, the risks high, the trade deadly, the truth elusive and uncertain. Danny Casolaro plunged into this sinister territory a year ago and for reasons yet unknown did not come out. □

## ■ WOMEN WARRIORS?

# Equality, Yes— Militarism, No

ANNETTE FUENTES

**W**hat had been unthinkable twenty years ago and unattainable ten years ago—the full integration of women into the voluntary service—is now on the horizon. On July 31, the Senate struck a blow for women's equality in the armed services when it voted to eliminate regulations that prohibited women in the Air Force and Navy from flying combat missions. The House had done the same in May. The forces fighting for women's equal opportunity seem to have scored a major, if mostly symbolic, victory at a time when women's rights are being sledgehammered by state legislatures, the courts and the Bush Administration. It's a victory, that is, if you consider elimination of combat exclusions an unadulterated feminist achievement.

In 1980, feminists of various stripes publicly wrestled with the question of women's relationship to the military. A case before the Supreme Court, *Rostker v. Goldberg*, filed by a men's veterans group, challenged the constitutionality of a male-only draft. *Rostker* was championed by the National Organization for Women. NOW and its president at the time, Eleanor Smeal, were criticized by many peace activists and antimilitarist feminists for their stance.

This time around, NOW is still advocating the equal opportunity position on women and the military, as are many other national women's legal and policy organizations. But the voices of feminists who consider combat inclusion a dubious advance have been muted. The sole debate has been between conservative types who think G.I. Jane will sabotage male bonding on the frontlines, and the equal rights advocates who argue that dropping all barriers to women in the military is not only fair, it contributes to military preparedness.

"The only thing exclusion protects is men's jobs," said Patricia Ireland, executive vice president of NOW. "It limits the services' ability to put the best people in the jobs." When pressed, she acknowledged NOW's pacifist philosophy, but said that "women need to be in all the powerful institutions in society. As long as the military and Congress remain men's

clubs, women's perspective is excluded and public policy is worse for it."

The gulf war provided the main impetus to Congress's action. "Obviously, as a result of Operation Desert Storm, attention has been focused on the 1948 laws restricting women in the military," says Carolyn Becraft, a former Army officer who works for Women's Research and Education Institute. "The gulf war showed women in combat." Indeed, the 35,000 women deployed in the Persian Gulf were front and center in press coverage of that military action. Eleven women died in the war, five in combat. Two women were taken prisoner. Who could deny that women had proved their mettle and deserved all the opportunities men get in the armed forces?

Certainly not the U.S. public. A *Newsweek* poll taken during the war found that 63 percent of respondents approved of having women pilots, 53 percent said women should have combat assignments if they want them and 50 percent believed any future draft should include women. The Pentagon has been testing the waters of public opinion regarding women in combat situations since the 1983 invasion of Grenada. Press censorship in that operation was so impenetrable that no images of the 170 women soldiers sent to the island leaked out.

Panama was next, and the public got a closer look at 800 women who were getting a closer look at combat. Still, the military was sensitive to coverage of their participation. One wire story reported that two women drivers refused to ferry troops into Panama City during heavy fighting. But, in an expert display of damage control, public affairs officers exonerated the drivers in a statement that was attached to a release about two female helicopter pilots who received medals of valor.

By contrast, the coverage of Desert Storm was a red, white and blue tribute to women soldiers. When a Scud missile destroyed a U.S. barracks in Saudi Arabia, killing twenty-eight, including two women, it also seemed to smash old definitions of frontline and combat zones. Predictions that Americans couldn't tolerate women coming home in body bags were exploded, too. A majority of them apparently don't care about keeping women out of harm's way anymore.

**F**rom the Pentagon's perspective, the use of women in the services is "a labor issue," says Linda De Pauw, a historian and founder of The Minerva Center on women and the military in Arlington, Virginia. "What's driving the extended use of women is military need, especially in the modern army. Military work has become increasingly technological." Expanding the role of the growing number of female soldiers "fits in with the idea of Workforce 2000 [the Hudson Institute's phrase for the work force of the future], which is increasingly women and minority," she says. "Smart managers see they can't be bigots. It's counterproductive."

In fact, women of color make up 38 percent of all women (officers and enlisted) in the services; black women alone are 30 percent. In the Army, women of color are 55 percent of all enlisted women; black women are 47 percent. "The military has always provided equal opportunity. In that way, it is way ahead of the civilian sector," says Becraft. The reten-

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